

# MEMORY IS A KNAVE

by Shirley Abbott



Shirley Abbott,  
author of  
The Future of Love

EDITOR'S NOTE: After writing three nonfiction books, veteran writer and longtime New Yorker Shirley Abbott makes her fiction debut with *The Future of Love*, a novel that allows us to see the possibility of happiness even as

It's been said, perhaps too often, that all fiction is memoir and all memoir fiction. I've written three memoirs and now one novel. Is it time to own up?

I was born and grew up in Hot Springs, Arkansas, which in those days was sin city. My mother was a farm girl, not a sinner, and the circumstances of her life—and her mother's—gave me the makings of my first memoir, *Womenfolks*.

My father was a bookmaker, i.e., a bookie. He made our living taking bets on horses. Not a perfect father, but he was the best an aspiring writer could have wanted, for he was a passionate lover of books. "In the beginning was the word," and the word was with him, the spinner of tales. It occurred to me later that a horse race is a perfect metaphor for a narrative. His life and times gave me my second memoir, *The Bookmaker's Daughter*.

her characters and their beloved city are tested. We asked her to consider the difference between her characters' lives in New York and her own and between writing nonfiction and fiction that is informed by real life.

A third memoir, *Love's Apprenticeship*, is partly about love and its thrills and discontents, but chiefly about books and movies. And songs. And how women are taught to love and are snookered by love and uplifted and defined by it and how they sometimes survive it. And to what extent the conventional wisdom rules.

I never thought of my memoirs as being about me. I wanted them to be about the reader. Still, they weren't fiction. They were made out of memories. But memory is a knave.

As I began work on *The Future of Love*, I felt not only afraid but a fraud. I was Making Things Up. I knew my setting had to be New York—my home for many years, where I had married and worked in publishing and raised two daughters. But it did not belong to me the way Hot Springs belonged. Edith Wharton and Damon

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Runyon I am not. I began with a woman about my age. A widow (which I am not) who has one daughter. And one granddaughter (at the time I had none). For a while this character had a son and two nasty grandsons, but I killed them off.

My Antonia (was I thinking of Willa Cather?) lives on Perry Street, in the West Village, but her apartment is far grander than the one I inhabit and of a size that hardly exists on Perry Street. If you're fabricating real estate, you might as well make

it a three-bedroom apartment. I thought up a man for her—Sam Mendel, concocted out of two or three men I have known. Two other characters, the elderly gay couple who live in Antonia's building, presented themselves early on. But I was getting nowhere. There was no action. The horses refused to come out of the post.

And then that rough beast known as September 11, 2001, slouched toward lower Manhattan to be born. I was out in the streets when it happened, not far from the World Trade Center. My habit was (and is) to walk in that direction on a fine morning to the Staten Island Ferry slip and back. That morning, I had been delayed by a phone call and had only begun my walk when the attack occurred. I knew at once that this was a huge disaster, not some random mistake by air traffic control, and I ran home. And then,

somehow, as the days went on, I stopped feeling like an immigrant. This slammed, wounded city was mine. It needed all of us.

*"It was an honor to live here—polluted air, sirens, threats, grief, death, uncertainty, empty streets, lunacy, and all. Mettlesome, mad, heroic city!"*  
—SHIRLEY ABBOTT

Nobody was a foreigner. It was an honor to live here—polluted air, sirens, threats, grief, death, uncertainty, empty streets, lunacy, and all. Mettlesome, mad, heroic city! Walt Whitman would have been proud.

Life truly changed afterward. Politics was not the same. Everything had to be rethought. Thinking of those nineteen men who hated us enough to die for

their beliefs, I realized how little I knew. As I tried to make sense of things, my characters mysteriously began to get a life. Mark Adler, trapped by bad luck and fecklessness, came immediately on stage as Maggie's husband, Toni's dad. For him, as for his lover Sophie, 9/11 seems to open doors, to insist on choices. As it does for Edith, Sam's wife, who realizes she has scores to settle, battles to fight, and a way of life to conserve. Time, they realize, is short.

As I went onward, my characters grew up. The way children do. Not always doing what one wished. But under their own steam. With voices of their own.

Are they fictional? Yes, surely. None is a portrait of any person, living or dead, least of all me. But to my enduring surprise, every one of them, warts and all, is me, and I am them. ■